

OPEN TO HOPE, OPEN TO HELP

by Rick Lamke

The fifth annual State Farm Embrace Life Awards welcomed nominations for women and men who lost a spouse or parent, renewed their lives, and inspired others through their perseverance. The Company recognized 13 finalists, one for each zone, last month in Chicago. Each finalist received a \$10,000 cash award. This is the story of Northeast finalist, Ellen Lindeman, of Hartsville, PA.

Italy was the trip of a lifetime for Ted and Ellen Lindeman, daughter Taylor, age 5, and son Luke, age 3. Other than Ted feeling some discomfort in his throat, the family had an amazing time. They returned home in October, 2003, and celebrated Ted's 33rd birthday.

"I'm so thankful we had that time together", Ellen says. "Sometimes we don't realize how fortunate we are to have all our loved ones healthy and safe...until the unthinkable happens."

Later that month, they learned that Ted's throat problem was esophageal cancer. Despite chemotherapy, it spread throughout his body. Ted died the following January.

"As a young widow with two small children, I was thrown into a life of turmoil and uncertainty. Each day still holds an emptiness I cannot describe. My children's father is not here to see them grow. I miss my best friend and soul mate."

She also misses her kids, having to work two jobs now. "The fact that I am forced to spend less time with my children pains me terribly, especially given that my children now have only one parent to rely on, and they need me in their own grief."

In June, 2004, parents at Taylor's school organized a benefit dinner to support Ellen and her kids. At first, it was difficult to accept the help. "She didn't want to burden people", said Lana Forbes, the parent who nominated Ellen for Embrace Life. "And in the midst of her grief, she didn't want to be the center of attention." But she was also under financial strain. Ted had enough life insurance through another carrier to eventually save the house, but at the time, Ellen was overwhelmed by the paperwork. So she accepted the help, asking the parents to not solicit her family and friends who had already done so much. Strangers made the benefit dinner a success.

"Everyone from the school and surrounding community came out to help", Ellen says. "Just when you think no one cares, or that people are selfish, you're proved wrong. It amazed me how good, generous, and caring people can be."

The following year, Ellen was ready to do the same for others. She went on to form the nonprofit Ted Lindeman Outreach Foundation to offer emotional and financial support to other families during the shocking first phase of grief.

"Young mothers and fathers die every day", she says. "For at least the first year, you simply cannot absorb the blow of your loss. Your mind and heart will not allow you to accept that your loved one will never again walk through the door. In addition to grief, you may find yourself with financial difficulties you cannot even begin to deal with. Our hope is to surround such families with love and support, and to alleviate some of their financial concerns."

Ellen continues the dinner tradition each June to raise foundation funds. She'll also donate her Embrace Life monetary award.

"I'm really honored by this award, but right now there are so many families who need my help. Thanks to this community, I don't feel alone. I don't want anyone to feel alone, and that's why I do what I do."

"Families come to her in their grief", said Lana, "and she connects with them from a place of true understanding. She knows we need each other, and that "it takes a village" to create good in this world."

Ellen's advice to young parents is to treasure every day with loved ones and to accept help if that treasure is lost. "Be open to hope", she says, "and be open to help."

She also advises everyone to have life insurance, which she has through State Farm. "I'm such an advocate now, I should sell it myself. The majority of people who come to me do not have life insurance. When you're young, you think you're invincible, but you could lose everything without it. In retrospect, Ted and I should have had more."

Today, Taylor and Luke are happy, well-adjusted, and engaged in supporting their local animal shelter. They miss their dad, of course, but have remarkable empathy.

"They are very compassionate kids", Ellen says, "and they want to help people. They understand that's what life is about."

The town of Hartsville also has a new understanding. "Our community has been inspired by this amazing story of renewal", says Lana. "Ellen gives us perspective and teaches us to embrace life as she has. Our children are seeing us reach out and are participating in our efforts. Doing good is becoming part of who they are."

"Ted always gave of himself with utmost energy, laughter, and love," Ellen adds. "My hope is to help his light continue to shine in this world."